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SUBJECT: EMBASSY ENGAGES ON LIBERIAN REFUGEE REPATRIATION

REF: ACCRA 248

1. (U) Summary: In a February 14 meeting with Liberian Ambassador to Ghana von Ballmoos, Ambassador expressed USG support for the new GOL and for repatriation of Liberian refugees. Ref Coord echoed these themes in a speech to graduates of a skills training program at Budumburam Refugee Camp. The GOG, UNHCR and Refcoord held a second, very positive tripartite refugee meeting, focused on the need to repatriate Liberians and rehabilitate Krisan camp. End Summary.

Meeting with Liberian Ambassador

2. (U) Ambassador met with Liberian Ambassador to Ghana Rudolf von Ballmoos on February 1 to congratulate him on President Johnson-Sirleaf's inauguration. Von Ballmoos pointed to Ghana's possible future role in training the Liberian police. He opined that most of the Liberian refugees in Ghana were ready to return home, with only a few interested in resettlement. He was impressed that Budumburam Camp offered such amenities as electricity, vocational training, and schooling through the secondary level, providing opportunities that few children living in Liberia can currently enjoy. For refugees not wanting to repatriate, von Ballmoos hoped naturalization in Ghana might be an option, since many refugees had already spent over 10 years living near Accra. (Many Ghanaians who fled the Nkrumah government emigrated to Monrovia and eventually became Liberian citizens, he said.) Ambassador hoped that conditions would be ripe for more repatriation and also saw naturalization in Ghana as a viable alternative.

Speech at Budumburam Camp: Liberians, Go Home!

4. (U) On February 25, Ref Coord visited Budumburam Camp to attend a ceremony honoring graduates of a PRM-funded skills training class for teen mothers. In a speech to several hundred Liberian refugees, he encouraged repatriation, hoping the honorees would use their newly acquired skills to help rebuild their country. The visit marked the first time the GOG granted an embassy request to visit a refugee camp since it began requiring formal approval in December 2005.

Second Tripartite Meeting Focuses on Liberians

5. (SBU) Repatriation was also the dominant theme of a recent tripartite refugee meeting involving representatives from the Embassy, UNHCR, and the GOG on February 28. Acting UNHCR Representative Luc Stevens said despite shortfalls in staffing and funding, he would continue to do the "minimum" with what he had to assist refugees. (Comment: while this may have been a poor choice of words, it reflects UNHCR's concerns about budget cutbacks. End comment.) Stevens emphasized that his overarching priority was the repatriation of Liberians, with a target of 10,000 departures this year. Barnes offered three suggestions to encourage more repatriation: offer training in vocational skills so that refugees will feel more empowered to rebuild their lives and country; involve the Liberian embassy as a facilitator to the greatest extent possible; and inform the 300 Liberian refugees at Krisan so that they, too, can repatriate if they wish. Stevens said that currently only 50-75 refugees were repatriating each week by air, despite an increase in the baggage allowance to 50 kilograms per person. (Note: at this rate, it would take 20 years to empty out Budumburam Camp. End note.) Ref Coord said the USG was putting out the word that the large-scale resettlement of Liberians had ended. In addition, we were postponing or terminating some of our resettlement programs to encourage more Liberians to repatriate before the onset of the rainy season. Senior UNHCR Protection Officer Jane Muigai favored the naturalization of long-term Liberian refugees, to which the GOG interlocutors

had no direct response.

Update on Krisan

16. (SBU) Stevens told the group he intended to hire a UN Volunteer to conduct a long-awaited socio-economic survey of the Krisan refugee camp population, which he thought could be completed by mid-April. Questioned on resettlement, he said that after the survey, "We will proceed with the Sudanese," although the exact modalities were yet to be determined.

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Stevens also wanted to look more carefully at durable solutions for the Togolese living in Krisan since the camp opened in 1997. UNHCR staff at the Ho Field Office would conduct a similar socio-economic survey of the Togolese refugees in the Volta Region, with an expected completion date of April 30.

17. (SBU) In terms of refugee assistance at Krisan, Stevens said UNHCR would concentrate on the basics of water, sanitation, and food, abandoning its plan to re-introduce a UNIDO program to teach income-generating skills such as making palm oil. Participants questioned the value of such a program in the remote subsistence economy of the refugee camp area. He added that Geneva had given him the directive to "find a solution for Krisan and close the camp," but cautioned that this would take another 1-2 years. In light of a depleting food pipeline for Krisan, Stevens thought he might be able to divert funds from Budumburam as an interim fix at the end of March. Ref Coord pointed out that the U.S. and Norway were currently the World Food Program's only donors, and that if others step up to the plate, the USG might be persuaded to make additional contributions.

18. (SBU) Stevens expressed his disappointment that the Ghanaian judicial system had not yet dealt firmly with the provocateurs responsible for the arson at Krisan Camp in November. All suspects had been released on bail and many had returned to Krisan to receive their food rations, he asserted. Edwin Barnes, Chief Director at the Ministry of the Interior, replied that he would contact judicial authorities quietly to see what might be done about the presumed arsonists. Obviously, he could not be perceived as tampering with the system or infringing upon human rights, he added.

Comment

19. (SBU) The tripartite meeting was a follow-on to the Ambassador's January lunch (reftel). This meeting was more relaxed and jovial, reflecting a greater level of trust among the group. Clearly, the forum has helped UNHCR and the GOG to communicate more effectively, although the GOG remains somewhat miffed that it has not yet received a formal response to its October request for resettlement of the Sudanese. The next tripartite meeting is tentatively set for early April. Our impression is that UNHCR is moving in the right direction with the limited resources it has. Even with widespread international support, repatriation of the mostly Monrovia-based refugees in Ghana by air or by sea will require a good deal of persuasion and persistence, as opposed to the relatively straight-forward process of trucking agrarian refugees from Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire across the Liberian border. Furthermore, despite the Liberian Ambassador's comments, we believe that interest in possible resettlement remains high at Budumburam. End Comment.

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